



CORONAVIRUS

Coronavirus cases surge at Butner prison complex in NC, county official reports

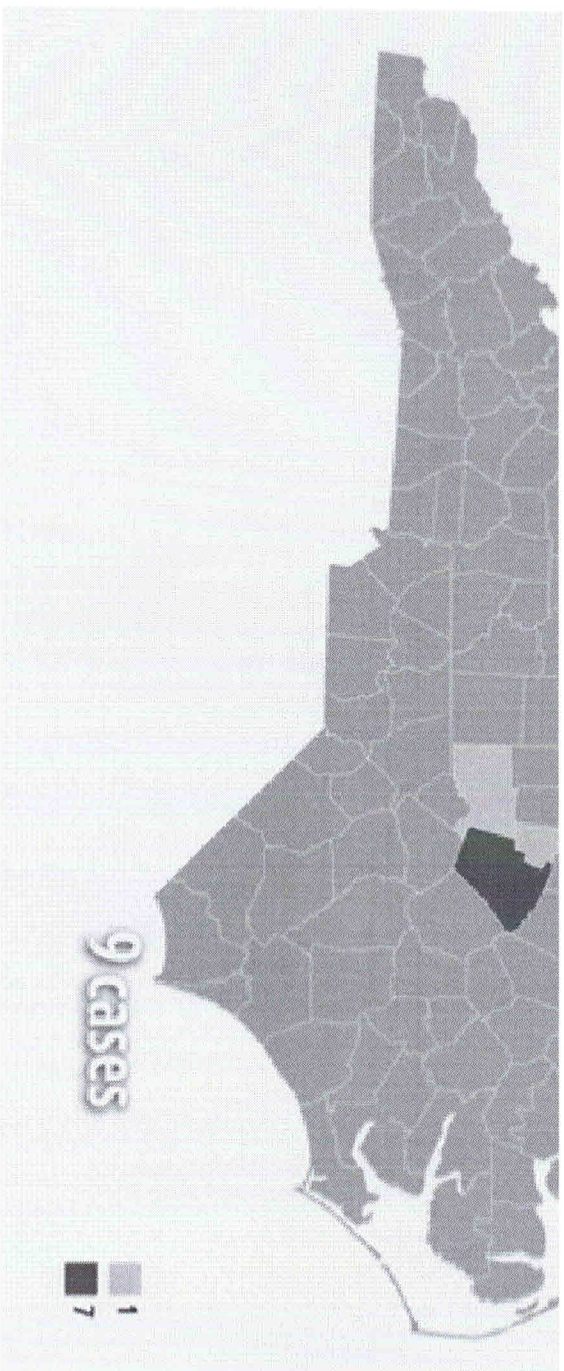
BY DAN KANE AND ASHAD HAJELA

APRIL 06, 2020 01:58 PM, UPDATED 3 HOURS 26 MINUTES AGO

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Beginning on Mar. 3, 2020, with the first reported case of COVID-19 in Wake County, the coronavirus has spread across North Carolina. Here's a look at the cumulative number cases by day as reported by NC DHHS and county health departments. BY KEVIN KEISTER



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The number of people at the Federal Correctional Complex in Butner who have tested positive for the coronavirus surged dramatically over the weekend, the director of Granville and Vance counties' public health department said Monday.

Public Health Director Lisa Macon Harrison said 59 people have tested positive at the complex,

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“We certainly have an outbreak situation at Butner’s prison, and I think they are doing a really good job of testing everyone right now, which is why those numbers are going to go up a great deal,” Harrison said.

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“It is very worrisome. It definitely is keeping me up at night.”

No deaths have been reported in the county.

Anthony DiPietro, a New York-based attorney with clients at Butner, said he is concerned about the situation there. He says his clients include cancer survivors and people with pre-existing health conditions, including heart disease and hypertension.

“Their sentences have been converted to death penalties because they just happen to be prisoners during this outbreak,” DiPietro said in a phone interview over the weekend.

“Their lives matter. They have families as well. This is not what we envision American prisons to be like.”

It is not just the prisoners who are at risk at Butner, DiPietro said. “If the inmate population is affected, it has a domino effect on the staff.”

DiPietro also called for more transparency from the federal Bureau of Prisons. Before the update, the bureau’s website continued to report as late as 5 p.m. Monday that just 11 inmates and one staff member had tested positive.

Efforts to reach the Bureau of Prisons by phone and email and Butner prison officials by phone have been unsuccessful.

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the number has climbed to 74 cases, including those from Butner.

“We do have other community spread in Granville County,” she said, but she added there was no evidence the prison was spreading the virus to those outside.

On March 26, the bureau reported the first case at the prison. It was a staffer who had contact with inmates. Four days later, the bureau reported two inmates had tested positive.

LIFE INSIDE

Inmates have reached out to their loved ones telling them about the conditions inside Butner.

Margaret Bollinger’s husband is in his mid-70s and is in good health, but since the coronavirus outbreak, life has become more difficult, she said in an email to The Charlotte Observer. Her husband reported to her that he is not allowed to visit the library, the TV room or the recreational yard, she said.

Inmates usually have access to computers, but now they are not allowed to use them, she said. Daily calls of up to 15 minutes were allowed earlier, Bollinger said, but now they can last just five minutes every two days. They have switched to bagged lunches, Bollinger said in the email. “Lots of peanut butter and frozen baloney!”

Jonathan Taylor’s father is incarcerated at Butner. He is 68 and had a triple bypass about two years ago, his son said. He has been in prison for three to four years, Taylor said.

Taylor said his father reported prisoners were allowed to bathe only three times a week.

In an email, his father said, “Even after the staff implemented a lockdown for the inmates at Butner

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and unusual punishments.”

OUTBREAKS IN FEDERAL PRISONS

Federal prisons across the country have reported coronavirus outbreaks, the worst being at Oakdale in Louisiana.

Last week, Democratic U.S. House members Jerrold Nadler and Karen Bass wrote to U.S. Attorney General William Barr asking him to identify and safely release inmates to help limit the spread of the virus to remaining inmates and staff. The March 30 letter was written after an inmate at Oakdale died of the virus.

“Finally, it goes without saying that we are deeply concerned about what is going on in BOP facilities around the country during this pandemic, especially now that a federal prisoner has died from COVID-19 and reports of increasing numbers of infected prisoners and correctional officers,” the letter said. “In the coming weeks, we hope you will institute aggressive measures to release medically-compromised, elderly and pregnant prisoners, as well as universal testing in BOP facilities—to protect everyone.”

On Friday, Barr ordered the prisons to release more inmates, particularly at those hardest hit by the virus, The New York Times reported. The bureau said on its website it has now placed 566 more inmates on home confinement, without detailing which prisons were affected.

Harrison said medical staff at the prison complex are doing everything they can to limit the virus’ spread. She said since it is a federal facility, her reach is limited.

“We are definitely in touch with them, and from what we can tell, their nurses and clinicians are doing everything possible,” she said.

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“We are very, very, very busy doing the work of public health in our own local communities and we do not have a lot of resources to spare to offer up to the federal prison system,” she said.

The complex includes the bureau’s largest medical center with space for 948 inmates, and low- and medium-security prisons that can house a combined 3,767 inmates.

The bureau’s latest numbers showed cases at three of the complex’s four facilities. The medical center had one case, the low-security prison had 14 and a medium-security prison had 39. It did not report which facility or facilities the employee worked in.

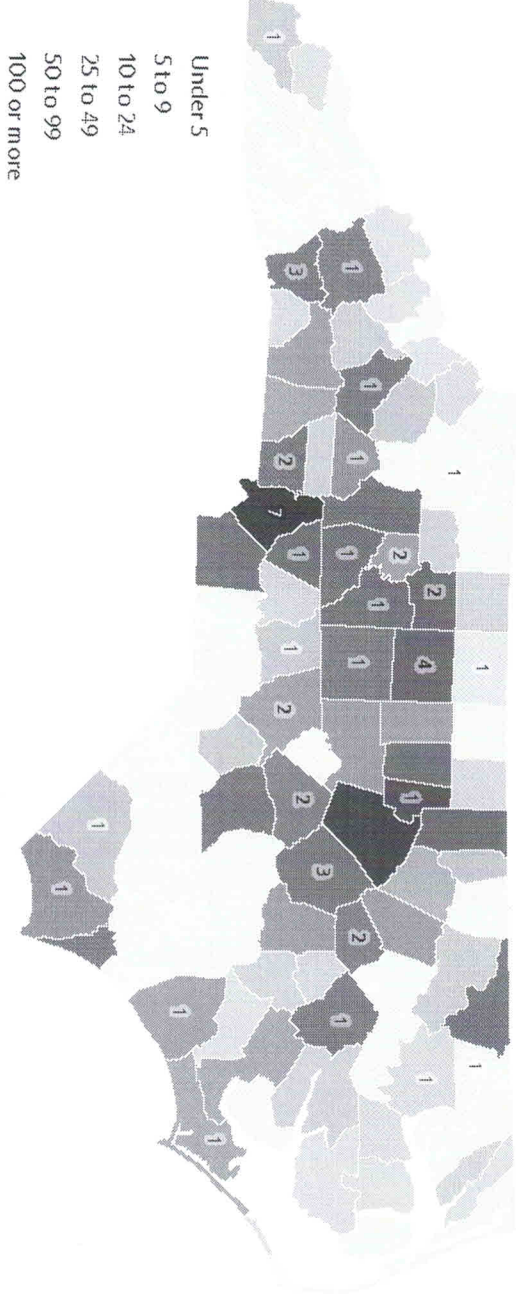
Ames Alexander of the Charlotte Observer contributed to this report.

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NC CORONAVIRUS CASES

Number of reported coronavirus cases by county as reported by NC DHHS and county health departments. Figures for the number of people who have recovered after testing positive are not available. Not all cases of COVID-19 are tested, so this does not represent the total number of people who have or had the virus. The number in the county represents the number of reported deaths due to the virus.



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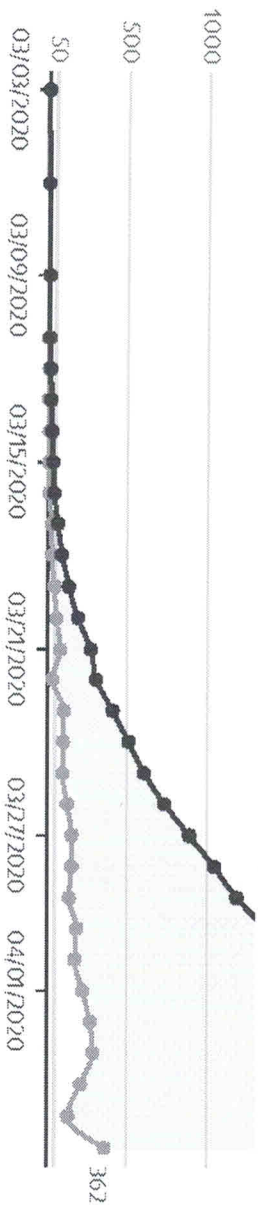


Chart: David Raynor • Source: NC DHHS and county health departments • Get the data

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